



## EXISTENTIALIST FEMINISM IN SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S 'SHE CAME TO STAY': A CRITICAL STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to study the feminist approach of Simone De Beauvoir as presented in her novel '*She Came to Stay*'. This novel is studied on the view point of the feminist theory. Simone De Beauvoir is a French feminist writer. Her contribution as a French feminist is recognized worldwide. She put forward her feminist views in her seminal essay "The Second Sex". She has also been influenced by the philosophy of Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx, Martin Heidegger and Descartes among others. Some critics call her the follower of Sartrean philosophy though it is still the topic of debate. The researcher has studied and examined the thematic concerns of the novel which are primarily feminist. The researcher has also studied the art of character delineation which emphasize the themes. Thus, this is an attempt to place the French feminist Simone De Beauvoir in critical perspective and assess her views on feminism through her selected novel.

**KEY WORDS:** Feminism, Feminist, Existential Feminism, French Feminism.

### INTRODUCTION:

The concept of Feminism, in general, has been concerned to an analysis of the trend of male domination in the society; the general attitude of male towards female; the exploitation and discrimination faced by females; the need for and ways of improving the condition of women; and, so on. In concern to literature, this movement has concentrated on the role played by literature to support gender discrimination as well as to oppose it; the reasons for lesser significance of the contribution by female writers in the literary tradition than that of the male writers; the difference in the ways in which works of male writers and female writers, respectively, have represented gender discrimination; and, the ways in which social conditions and literary traditions regarding gender discrimination have affected one another.

The concept got proper identification in the literary field during 1960s. Before that, feminism was limited to the authorship of female writers and the representation given to women in literature with the help of female characters. The condition of women in society, in general, got expression through the situations faced by fictional female characters and their responses to these situations. The adoption of the concept by literature in a formal manner led to the study of all the aspects of human life; like social, cultural, educational, professional and financial; with an intent to expose the intentional and unintentional efforts of the society to maintain or intensify the effects of patriarchal superiority.

### Overview of Feminism:

Feminism is not a singular term, but a plural one. The term has multiple meanings and interpretations. Each female writer has used feminist theory by keeping her own respective socio-political background in mind. Hence, feminism is a culture specific term. Though we have different shades of feminist theory like Anglo American and French Feminism, womanism and Indian feminism etc.

The vast scope of feminism has provided women writers across the world with the vocabulary and framework to articulate their experience of female oppression and feminist longing. The concept of feminism travels from radical feminism to Gyno-centricism in the west. The movement started as a reaction against man and passing through imitative and reactive phase, women writers now have decided to create their own literature, their own tradition of literary writing which is different from male writing. Current western feminist literary criticism has mainly manifested itself in two distinct schools of thought the French and the Anglo American. French theorists Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Helene Cixous employ Derrida's method of deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis to create a critique of feminism. They attack language, which they look upon as a tool of male domination to subjugate and relegate women to a secondary position. Dale Spender's *Man-Made Language* considers that women have been fundamentally oppressed by a male dominated language. French feminists question the very structure of language and reject all existing language as patriarchal.

On the other hand, the Anglo-American feminist critics have since the seventies been preoccupied with the idea that many women writers have been marginalized, silenced and excluded from main stream literature. Critics like Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar and Cheri Register are also of the view that since women's experiences and world view are different from that of man's their expression ought to be studied not in comparison with that of the man but by its

own standards.

### Feminism in France:

One of the most influential bodies of work in U.S. feminist theory to date, French Feminism emerged out of U.S. academic feminism of the early 1980s. Represented in its canonical formation by the work of Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, French Feminism has come to signify an academic feminism deeply engaged with poststructuralist thought, most notably Derridean deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and primarily concerned with sexual difference, language, and the unconscious.

As a U.S. invention, French Feminism is not written from France but, rather, from institutional and personal networks of travel between France and the U.S. Furthermore, the national origin of the very writers who have come to represent it—Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva—puts additional pressure on French Feminism's supposed Frenchness. Although all three work and live in Paris, none of them hail from metropolitan France. Helene Cixous was born in French Algeria of a German mother and Algerian father. Luce Irigaray moved to France from Belgium and Julia Kristeva emigrated from Bulgaria.

### Overview of the Novel:

'*She Came to Stay*' is the first novel written by Simone De Beauvoir. It was published in the year 1943. The major themes of the novels are: self-doubt, jealousy, feeling of insecurity, hunger for revenge and sexual inferiority. Besides these, the basic elements of a doomed relationship are the core of Beauvoir's existentialist ideas.

The heroine of the novel, Françoise Miquel, is a young writer who has lived with Pierre Labrousse, a talented actor and director, for eight years. They feel that their relationship is ideal because it allows them both a great deal of freedom. Françoise befriends Xavière, a young woman disenchanted with provincial life, and invites her to Paris, where she will help Xavière find work. Once in Paris, Xavière makes demands on the couple and is openly contemptuous of their values. Pierre becomes obsessed with Xavière; Françoise, trying to rise above the jealousy and insecurity she feels, struggles to keep the trio together. Out of resentment, Françoise has an affair with Gerbert, Xavière's suitor. The novel ends as Xavière recognizes Françoise's duplicity; Xavière has now become the critical Other. Unable to live in her presence, Françoise turns on the gas and murders her. '*She Came to Stay*' is a meditation on the Hegelian problem of the existence of the other. The novel plays out the psychological effects of jealousy and questions the extent to which coexistence is possible.

### Existential Feminism in the Novel '*She Came to Stay*':

It is important to note that *She Came to Stay* is not the literal translation of Beauvoir's work, *L'Invitée*; a literal translation would be 'The Invited.' The difference in the connotation of the titles is enough to add a note of justification to the set of principles by which Xavière lives by in that if she were invited, she would not feel inclined to meet the expectations her hosts could have for her. If she had simply decided to stay in Paris at the expense of another, her attitude would be justified in the least.

In *She Came to Stay* the readers are made aware of Beauvoir's recurring theme of

the other. Beauvoir and other existentialist scholars hold the concept of the other to be fundamentally important to the idea of being in that one cannot have the latter without the former. The main characters introduce us to the vulnerability of our freedom as it relates to the other. We are also equally reminded that we rely on the other's recognition of our being as means of attaining a certainty of our existence. Beauvoir's Ethics of Ambiguity contemplates the importance and dangers of the other and one is inclined to agree that,

...whereas the self is experienced as permeable and insecure, the other appears as self-sufficient and firmly grounded, and this perception of the other both reveals and exacerbates the insecurity of the self. Thus, the other becomes a 'presence enemy', a threat and a danger to one's own autonomy by its very existence. The only way out of the struggle is to destroy the other in a violent assertion of the supremacy of the self. (71)

The notion of youth and coming to being is also a recurring theme in this work. The idea is that after reaching the age of consent one must assume one's own freedom and avoid "the serious" as Beauvoir calls it. In other words, children are not responsible for their own freedom; they are simply living their lives according to the whims of the adults providing for them. At the beginning of the novel, Xaviere is not yet an adult; having lived her life under the care of her uncle, she has never had to do anything on her own accord. When Francoise finds her in Rouen, she is afraid that the girl will waste away without ever having done anything with her life; in other words, she fears she will live in bad faith or the life of the serious.

At the opening of the novel, Francoise meets Xaviere as a young girl in need of rescuing and guidance and despite his initial indifference to the girl's fate, Pierre helps convince her to take Xaviere in. Up until this moment Francoise and Pierre think of their relationship and each other as one entity. They share thoughts, ideas, and feelings and we are immediately exposed to the idea that one can be free while tied to another at the same time. This idea of two beings coming together as one consolidated entity will be a constant in Francoise's mind throughout the novel and we will watch it fading away through her eyes. As the novel progresses, we begin to see Xaviere become a larger part of their individual lives and the oneness of their relationship turns into two people. Even more damaging to their relationship is that Pierre no longer thinks of Xaviere as Francoise's helpless friend but as a person he could very well have for himself, a challenge for him to conquer. As they stop sharing thoughts and even some ideas, we begin to see Francoise become filled with jealousy at the thought of Pierre and Xaviere forming a relationship without her. Still, she continues to encourage him out of fear of losing him altogether by hindering him from seeking something his being so desires.

Another thing one can notice is that well into the novel Xaviere is still not doing much with her life and depends on Pierre and Francoise for entertainment and really everything else. Francoise is preoccupied with the progress of her book and with Pierre's play while Pierre is dedicating his time to the latter and the daily tasks that accompanied life in Paris before the war. The capricious Xaviere resents them for the lack of attention she feels is being paid to her and she expresses them in the hateful ways of an immature child. We can see that while things are changing around her, she refuses to progress with them.

Despite all attempts to interest the girl in any sort of vocation, even in theatre, nothing seems to hold her attention long enough to become a career or even hobby. Francoise begins to see that she cannot understand the girl and cannot find a way to keep her content while Pierre has set it to himself to maintain himself in good favor with Xaviere. His own actions are largely to blame for Francoise's jealousy because not only is he taking himself from her but he is also taking part, if not most of, the devotion Xaviere has for Francoise away. He is aware of the young girl's tendency to worship and does not hesitate when given the opportunity to become the object of worship. It is at this moment that Francoise is desperate to escape the prison she feels their relationship and involvement with Xaviere has created.

When Francoise is ill, she accepts her bed rest as a relief from the life that she felt herself trapped in. This separation from both Pierre and Xaviere in the outside world allows her to regain a peace of mind she lost when Xaviere became such a large part of their lives. Solitude allows her to regain control of her thoughts and her very being instead of relying so heavily on the acknowledgment of the other to know that she in fact does exist. She is content with having visitors and spending just the same amount of time by herself until her own thoughts begin to create a hypothetical world in which everyone is moving forward when she sees how happy Pierre and Xaviere are to be working together. She is no longer happy with her solitude and she worries about the pair getting along with their lives without her. Her bed rest then becomes yet another imprisonment and she finds herself to become strong enough to go home as soon as possible. Things seem to alleviate after she leaves the hospital and the trio begin their romance together.

Beauvoir creates a free and open agreement between the three but also manages to create a sense of incredible restriction between them. However, the joy does not last as Xaviere's caprice displays itself once more when Pierre and Francoise begin speaking of war in front of her yet again. Outside of their relationship they do not have the liberty to live freely and it becomes clearer as the weeks pass.

They get through tainted moments but Francoise becomes consumed in anguish and frustration again, as she struggles to understand the girl and tortures herself as she wonders if Xaviere hates her ideas or worse, her very essence. This becomes more obvious as Xaviere repeatedly condemns the idea of purity yet praises Francoise for being such a pure being. Beauvoir's work is multifaceted in relation to the events the three are facing; one of which is the possibility of going on tour around Europe. Pierre and Xaviere are fond of the idea and agree that being away from Paris will allow them to remain devoted to the trio. Again, the idea of individual freedom is sacrificed and Francoise relinquishes her freedom as she reluctantly agrees to their idea of remaining together and being only for each other for the next five years. The importance both Francoise and Pierre place on this commitment is reflective of the discipline existentialism demands from people who choose it but Xaviere's disregard for it becomes the nihilist foil when she disregards it as a frivolous agreement in a later chapter.

Desire is also a prevalent concept in this work because the threat Francoise feels as she believes Xaviere will take Pierre from her pushes her to confront her separateness (after accepting that she and Pierre were not one) and announces her freedom. We come to see that Francoise often felt herself alienated from the rest and from her freedom; this is especially true in her desperate attempt to find resolve before falling ill. Francoise suffers a constant anguish in her fruitless endeavor to figure Xaviere out. She is constantly tormented at the idea that the young girl might hate her or she fears causing her any sort of displeasure. Also, worth noting, however, is the idea that crosses Francoise's mind on the dance floor of the Bal Colonial, that she might desire Xaviere.

Later that same evening, Francoise thinks to herself that, "Whatever happened to Xaviere, happened through, and Xaviere, whether she liked it or not, belonged to her." (75) We begin to move away from anguish and into the arena of rage and irrationality. Francoise seems to be entering into an even more unhealthy stage of possession that only foreshadows a bad ending for one or more people. In an earlier part of the novel she resents Pierre for lingering with the two longer than his allotted time with the girl and hates the idea that Xaviere thinks of him in a higher regard than her. Francoise seems to be in a never-ending cycle of adoration, confusion, anger, and anguish that only shift in accordance to Xaviere's moods until she reaches a point of unyielding irritation with the girl's existence.

The idea of war and politics are common elements in Beauvoir's works and this is no different in *She Came to Stay*. Francoise and Pierre often join their friends Gerbert, Paula, and Pierre's sister, Elizabeth at cafes or at the theatre and the conversation about war inevitably enters their discussion. Elizabeth seems to revel at the idea of France entering the war until she is faced with the reality of her brother being sent into danger while Gerbert fears it and expresses preference in leaving France before it comes to that.

Pierre and Francoise often speak about it but it is not until a later outing with Gerbert that Pierre finally states that he would much rather go to war for France than to flee the country or to have signed up to fight for any other country like Spain, as Gerbert suggests. Beauvoir gives a great importance to place here as Pierre argues that it matters not that he is going to war or why is doing so but the idea that "this particular war is a part of [his] own personal history." (76) The young Xaviere is easily irritated by talk of either war or politics in general because she does not understand them and therefore cannot participate in conversations adequately. Her tyrannical claim to their time and even the kinds of discussions they are allowed to have when she is around causes concern in their friends because they are accustomed to the freedom the couple once lived with.

Gerbert becomes central to Beauvoir's work as he and Xaviere embark upon a romantic relationship despite Pierre's interest in the young lady. This sends the trio into a frenzy of disputes and bouts of anger until Pierre breaks with Xaviere for having slept with Gerbert. The young lady becomes a pathetic sight after this abandonment and elicits pity from Francoise. She in turn, no longer feels the joy she felt when the relationship initially broke off and is trapped yet again so she ultimately attempts to bring Pierre and Xaviere together. As all of this is happening, the war becomes a reality and it is inevitable that both Pierre and Gerbert join the army. Beauvoir increases the pace of the novel as they reach this point of their lives and sends Gerbert and Francoise on a backpacking trip that ends in their becoming intimate. This becomes a secret relationship that Xaviere discovers by attaining access to Francoise's desk. The two quarrel and in her own contemplation Francoise admits to having become involved with Gerbert as revenge for having lost Pierre's love as Xaviere always wanted. Trivial as this may seem Beauvoir was very careful in unraveling this scandalous affair as a way to get to Francoise's final act.

The novel culminates with Francoise's murder of Xaviere and one is left to contemplate whether Beauvoir's epigraph, "Each conscience seeks the death of the other," from Hegel, signals that she is reverting back to the Hegelian idea of the destruction of the other or if she is deliberately contrasting Hegel's death of a conscience with the death of a specific other. Francoise reinforces this idea when she breaks into tears as she tells Pierre that she found her consciousness reflected in Xaviere. Thus, *She Came to Stay* sticks to freedom and one's responsibility for one's self.

Francoise decides to let go of her ethics and attempts at remaining as pure as she

could and decides to choose herself over Xaviere. Francoise chooses to kill her as a way to finally to regain her freedom. Colin Davis writes,

Beauvoir herself indicated that writing *L'Invite* was an equivalent or substitute for the act of murder with which the novel culminates, and in the words of Toril Moi, writing serves as 'a weapon against the power of the Other' (124)

The presence of violence and the desire to destroy the other for the sake of retaining autonomy in this work is only the beginning of Beauvoir's exploration into the realm of violence. Beauvoir leaves open the discussion of ambiguity regarding the finitude and duties of our freedom, the legitimacy of violence as it relates to the question of ethics, and the tension between our experiences of ourselves as simultaneously solitary and intertwined with others.

#### CONCLUSION:

The character of Francois possesses existentialistic viewpoints and the novel is also about Francois attempting to discover who she is and her place within the world once everything and everyone in her life have been stripped away. Set during the eve of WWII, questions of love and life are consistently played in the mind of the characters. Gerbert, who is about to be sent off to war, is astounded to find that his long-time object of affection so easily returns his advances. Francois's constant attempts to be friends and forgive Xaviere is irritating when anybody can see how cruel Xaviere is. Xaviere is even more irritating with no redeeming features about her whatsoever. Unable to live in her presence, Françoise turns on the gas and murders her. '*She Came to Stay*' is a meditation on the Hegelian problem of the existence of the other. The novel plays out the psychological effects of jealousy and questions the extent to which coexistence is possible.

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